

It has rained, it is raining, it will start to rain

by Sabine Eiche

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Right now it's raining. The newspapers report that it's a light rain. There's a lot of precipitation in this part of the world, and therefore our weatherpeople have to forecast rain a great deal of the time.

I wonder if, deep down, any of them are philologists? The word philologist belongs to a group beginning with the Greek "phil" or "philo," which means lover, loving. In this particular example, "philo" is followed by "logos," signifying word. A philologist, then, is a lover of words or language. If any weatherpeople fall into this category, they must feel frustrated to have to contain themselves to saying light rain, heavy rain, or just plain rain. It's probably not much of a solace that every now and then they can come out with the word shower.

We all know that weather forecasters cannot sever the ties to the science of meteorology, but I like to imagine that the philologists among them occasionally yearn to delve into the treasury of words in search of different ways to say or describe rain.

What forecaster would not be tempted to tell us that the light rain was a sprinkling or a falling mist, a drizzle (from Old English "dreosan," fall or drop, related to dreary), a mizzle (late Middle English, from the base of mist) or a skit (from Old Norse "skyt," shoot). And when it comes to heavy precipitation, the kind requiring waterproof gear from head to foot, do any of them long to tell us that we're in for a downpour, drencher (from Old English "drenc," a drink),

soaker (root in Old English “soc,” to suck at the breast), or a pelting, slashing, driving, gushing or plashing rain?

Did you notice that all the words for foul weather have an early English or Nordic, rather than Latin or Greek, origin? Even plain rain, which derives from the Old English “regn,” and shower, from “scur,” an Old English word originally meaning a fit of illness. It’s logical – where bad weather is common, there are many words to describe it.

The Latin words for rain are “pluvia” and “nimbus.” We now use nimbus to refer to a particular type of cloud, and “pluvia” has made it into English as the adjectives pluvial and pluvius – completely lacking the punch that characterizes words from places where drenchers are a matter of course. Snow, in Latin, is “nix,” from which we derive the adjective niveous. Our snow came from the Old English “snaw.” The United States gave us the word blizzard. It was coined in 1829, but then it signified a sharp blow; it wasn’t applied to a meteorological phenomenon until 1870.

Although newspapers rarely grant weatherpeople space for more than a couple of words, the internet site Vancouver Weatherpage sometimes runs a lengthy synopsis. I enjoy reading it, mainly because it often includes passages that remind me of an informal monologue. I applaud the writer of those synopses for managing to shrug off the impersonal, strictly scientific tone.

Let the philologically inclined weatherperson take courage and comfort in Mark Twain’s observation in the foreword to *The American Claimant* of 1892: “Weather is a literary specialty, and no untrained hand can turn out a good article on it.”